**A Single Decision (Take Two)**

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
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**Chapter Eleven**

For once, Grievous was grateful for his machine parts, they might have just won him this battle. And what a strange battle it was. He had to admit, they had a good plan. At some point in the night, the Gossams had broken into the building and taken it over. Then, they'd hid until he was in the Congress chamber, and moved to surround it as he spoke. As soon as he began to leave, they'd thrown pulse grenades at his magnaguards in the hall, and then thrown more in his direction as he walked through the door. At the same time, they'd shut down the battle-droids in the area and moved to secure the local police headquarters and communications array. The goal was to capture him and paralyze the city, and it had succeeded. As far as the Gossams knew, Grievous was incapacitated and would remain so, safely held in the building's security suite.

But what they didn't know, was that Grievous had sent his electronic systems into emergency shutdown in the one second of warning he'd had. The electromagnetic pulses had no doubt disturbed some of his machine part's circuitry, but not badly. He could reboot his systems at any moment. The only problem was that the Gossams were smart, and had wrapped him up in a cable they'd found, just for redundancy's sake. Breaking out wouldn't be hard, but it would take time, and time was what Grievous didn't have while surrounded by a full squad of them. All he could do was simmer in his own anger. He wasn't even as angry as he ought to have been, though; Grievous was impressed with the speed and competency of this operation. Where had these soldiers been hiding for the whole war? Who knew what havoc he could have wreaked had he had but a company of men like these?

He soon got his answer when the hologram of Shu Mai appeared. "*Is he secured?*" she asked. So, she'd made a move. The woman had always been uppity with Grievous, she was finally delivering on her threats. Grievous wondered who else was on her side.

"*We have taken Grievous prisoner, alive,*" reported the commander of the Gossams. "*As predicted, the local police are putting up a resistance, but it will soon be dealt with. We have taken the communications array as well, no one outside of the system knows what is happening. All droids in the system have received a shut-down order and obeyed it, to our knowledge.*"

"*What about his flagship?*" Shu Mai asked, crossing her arms and scowling.

"Invisible Hand *has been chased off to Raxus Quintus by our ships, her hyperdrive is damaged, we believe, but our jamming has stopped them from calling aid,*" the commander said.

"*What? It's just one ship, destroy it!*" huffed Shu Mai.

"*It is proving more difficult than expected,*" was all the commander had to say. Grievous made a note to himself to reward Captain Dofine. As expected, he was keeping his cool under immense pressure and making his foes look bad all the while. "*You are correct, though,* Invisible Hand *is just one ship, and one that is moderately damaged and being chased further away. The system is safe for your arrival.*"

*Good*, thought Grievous, as the hologram turned off. He'd be able to catch the traitors when he made his inevitable escape. And he *would* escape. Grievous had not come this far to die to Commerce Guild lackeys, no matter how skilled they were. He hadn't even killed San Hill yet! No, he would survive this. All he needed was a distraction.

Another Gossam officer arrived in the security suite. "*Commander, two more representatives have gone missing,*" he reported. "*The Karkarodon and Umbaran caused a disturbance and escaped.*"

"*What of the two humans and the Sephi?*" asked the commander.

"*We were tracking them, but they've disappeared. The blueprints of this building must be outdated, we're finding passages and doors that we have not expected. They are most likely using these unmarked areas to move about,*" said the officer. "*They are armed, and all squads have been alerted to their presence.*"

These politicians had more fight in them than he expected. Grievous was pleasantly surprised that they were already taking matters into their own hands. What a rare joy it was, to find competent underlings!

"*Very well,*" the commander said. "*Capture if possible, kill if necessary. I leave the details to you.*"

All there was to do now was wait. Grievous sat quietly, something he'd never tried before, and wondered who would be the lucky one to give him the distraction he needed to break out.

R8 projected a hologram of the Congress building. The huge semi-circlular structure was focused around a central tower, which they were directly beneath. Currently, Esera and her merry band were located on the fourth floor. Horthy's maintenance passage had turned out to be more of a maintenance space crammed between two walls. It was dark, dusty, and cramped, but at least they were safe here. Getting R8 up the ladders had been a pain though...

"So, where'd you get this layout?" asked Lirka, wiping a grimy mix of sweat and dust off her brow with a shirt sleeve. Esera had already given up on staying clean, as had Horthy. "Did you hack the main computer?"

"R8 downloaded it from the public library's database," said Esera; an answer that made Lirka frown. The mundane nature of her explanation seemed to disappoint her friend. *She really does think I'm a secret agent!* "It seems that the heart of this building, so to speak, is here." Esera pointed to a room buried deep in in the center, only a few floors above them, nestled between the express elevator shafts that led up into the tower. "This is the security suite, according to the blueprints. I imagine that the attackers are running their operation from there."

"Wise guess," agreed Horthy. "You think the General is in there?"

"Is there a more secure location here?" asked Esera.

"Doubt it," Horthy said. "Getting in there won't be easy. It's surrounded by the elevators, except for the one door in. And you know they're going to be guarding it. These guys don't look like amateurs."

"They're not," said Esera. "They're the Castell Commandos, children purchased from Gossam families stuck in debt slavery to the Commerce Guild and trained from that age as soldiers. I've never encountered them before, but I've seen their handiwork on Umbara. They wiped the servers in the capital, fried half the planet's electric grid, ran circles around the clones, and then vanished."

"Wow," whispered Lirka. "You were on Umbara when it fell? How'd you get off? The Republic made it a restricted zone."

"You'll figure it out soon enough..." Esera muttered. Again, she got a strange look out of Horthy. The man seemed a lot less naive than Lirka, he was probably starting to suspect she wasn't a Separatist at all. *Well, I wasn't, until this morning.*

"So, Miss Esera, I take it you have a plan?" asked Horthy.

"What makes you think that?" Esera answered. The truth was, she *did* have a plan, however stupid it was. Maybe he had a better one.

"I've fought my share of bantha rustlers in my time, it's just how things are on Fallowan. Never gone head to head with special forces, though. But here you are, acting like it's just normal."

"Yeah, Esera, you're a natural at this!" Lirka said, nodding and smiling. "I've only known you a day and a half, but this is the first time I've seen you at ease. You're really good at this fighting business."

*I wish I wasn't,* Esera thought. Denying the truth wouldn't do anyone any good, though, war had become the norm of her life. It was a saddening notion. "Before I tell you my idea, I want to hear yours."

"I don't have any, I just want to help," Lirka said. Esera didn't know how much help Lirka would be. In fact, she'd probably be dead weight.

"My first thought was cause a distraction, lure them away from the security suite, and then go in guns blazing," Horthy said, frowning. "Can't say it'd work, if what you say about these fellows is true."

"Well... This is going to sound crazy, but I've done this before." The two leaned in closer to listen. "We make a second door into the security suite. Cut our way into an elevator shaft, bridge the gap, and then cut our way into their room. They'll never see it coming."

"Of course they won't see it coming, it's impossible! We'd need an industrial-grade cutting torch," Horthy said.

"We've got something just as good," said Esera.

"Alright, assuming you've got some hidden tool, how do we stop them from swarming our new door?" Horthy asked. "The moment we start cutting, they'll be onto us."

"Hmm... I suppose we'd still need a distraction." Esera put a hand on her chin. "There's only three of us, though."

"I guarantee you at least one other person got out of that chamber. I know my colleagues, some of them are too wild to be contained," Horthy said. "We should find them."

"Where will they be? How do we find them?" asked Esera. "This isn't exactly a small building."

"I'd bet my boots that Lan Cathida got out," said Horthy, putting a hand on his chin. "He's a fighter, through and through. I wonder if..." As Horthy muttered on, Lirka took out her communicator.

"Why don't we just call him?" she asked. "I've got his number."

"Do I want to know why?" asked Horthy.

"Hey-!"

"Whatever, it doesn't matter," Esera sighed. "Just do it."

Lirka did as told, and momentarily, a tiny hologram of a Karkarodon appeared. He appeared to be filling a tank up with water from some unseen source. "If you're looking for more quality seafood restaurants, this isn't a good time, kid," said the one who was surely Lan Cathida. Even through the transmission, he had a voice made of gravel. "I'm a bit busy."

"Actually, Representative Cathida, my friends and I are a bit busy too. Mister Horthy and Miss Komara are here with me, we're on the run from those Commerce Guild rats!" she said. "Could you help us?" Cathida raised his head.

"Well, I got nothing better to do. You got any guns?" he asked.

"A few," Horthy said, leaning into the projector's range.

*A few!?* Esera gave the man a glare.

"Give me a place and a time," said the Karkarodon, "and I'll be there."

Kronaak had been sleeping in his bath when he got a call from OOM-27. "Sir," squeaked the battle-droid, "we're received a strange message from Raxus. You may want to get up here."

"Very well," sighed Kronaak, hauling himself upright. Though his people mostly dwelt on land, they could not help but feel comfortable in water. Sleeping in the water had proven to be an excellent way of relaxing during the war. *What could this message be?* he wondered, slightly irked he'd had to wake up over this.

On the bridge, 27 stood waiting, wringing his metal hands together. If droids could sweat nervously, Kronaak had the feeling 27 would be right now. His mimicry of humanoid body language was fascinating. "What is it?" Kronaak asked. There was a hologram message playing... of Shu Mai. Incredibly, she was speaking the Galactic standard, and not Gossam.

"...the radical minority government of the Confederacy has proven to be foolish and shortsighted by handing over power to a madman. Grievous is a mindless butcher who would lead us all to our deaths for the sake of his own pride. Therefore, we, the financial backers of this failed endeavor, have overthrown him, and he now is in our custody. The war is lost, and now it will end. Our bid for independence has failed. With the complete awareness that we represent the true and full voice of the popular will, we will enter into negotiations of surrender with Republic to end this destructive conflict. All forces are ordered to halt their advance and await confirmation of a ceasefire with the-"

"Shut it off," Kronaak growled. "And get me in contact with the rest of the fleet." 27 did as told. Within moments, an impromptu conference of fleet commanders in the area of Triton had gathered on the flagship.

"Gentlemen, we all heard the same thing," said the Umbaran, Vice Admiral Hithlu, acting commander of the fleet. He alone seemed calm and collected; Commodore Alzar Khwaramenes, the Givin, was twitching with anger, while Ricimer Eemon seemed to be in a sour mood by the look on his face. Kronaak clenched his claws open and shut. "The question now," Hithlu went on, "is what to do."

"We go to Raxus and kill every traitorous piece of-" Kronaak began to rumble, only to be cut off by Khwaramenes.

"It'd take six and two-ninths days to get there," he said. "We'd never make it in time to stop them."

"My worry is that some of our comrades may take this seriously," Eemon spoke. "Holes will open in our lines, those who fight on will be encircled and destroyed. Someone needs to move fast."

"And move fast we will." Hithlu the Umbaran smiled coolly. "Utupau is only a few hours from here. Grievous intended to use it as his new military headquarters, we can contact the entire Navy from there. Once again, the corporate leeches will have underestimated those they see beneath them. While we cannot help our good General directly, we can certainly enable others to do so. Kronaak, Eemon, you will come with me. Commodore, you have command of the fleet."

"Me, sir?" the Givin sat up, now alarmed.

"Yes, you," said Hithlu. "Who else?"

Khwaramenes stood, and saluted. "I will do as you command, sir."

"Hold the line, Commodore, and there may be a promotion in it for you. The rest of you, to your ships," ordered Hithlu.

Eemon approached Kronaak shortly afterwords, as they went to the hangar. "It's very clever, isn't it?" he asked.

"Hmm?" Kronaak was stirred from his own thoughts. Worry and anger mixed in his heart, he didn't not know if he should fear the future or rage against it.

"Vice-Admiral Hithlu, I mean," said Eemon. "He's setting himself up for success, and we're along for the ride."

"I don't see what you mean."

"Well, perhaps you will soon."

It had taken a full hour to find a service hall with no camera in it, and another for the Karkarodon to make his way there. How such a big creature could move with stealth, Esera had no idea. "Who are you?" Lan Cathida asked, upon seeing her.

"Someone in the wrong place at the wrong time," said Esera.

"Hmm," grunted Cathida.

"It may be the wrong place, but it certainly is the right time," said another new vice. An Umbaran woman stepped out from behind the Karkarodon.

"Oh, hello, Representative Wendil," Lirka said.

*Should I even be surprised?* Esera wondered. Umbarans always turned up out of thin air. *At least I'm no longer the shortest person here...* It was the small victories in life that counted most, her master had always said.

"I don't know where she came from," Cathida said, glancing a the little Umbaran. "One moment I was alone, and the next she was there. She hasn't stopped following me since."

"Even we know that there is strength in numbers," said Wendil. "Besides, these soldiers don't know this building like we do, we have the initiative."

"That's for sure," agreed Horthy. "I see you've armed yourselves already."

"It came at a cost, they're much more alert now." Cathida snorted, or made some noise that sounded like a snort. Did sharks actually snort? Esera didn't know. "I don't think we'll be able to get the jump on them again."

"We won't need to." said Esera. She filled the newcomers in on the plan: Esera and Lirka would go for the elevator on the same floor as the security suite, while Horthy, Cathida, and now Wendil too would attempt to draw the Gossams away from the area. Lirka would watch Esera's back; Esera would cut through the elevator shaft and bridge the gap. After that... Well, they'd deal with that problem when it arose. *I can't believe I'm about to rescue General Grievous,* Esera thought. The very idea made her stomach twist. But getting captured by the Commerce Guild's slave-soldiers and sold to the Republic that was fully prepared to execute her for treason was an even worse thought.

"This sounds suicidal," Wendil said, when everything was explained.

"If this girl doesn't work as fast as she claims she can, it will be," Cathida agreed.

"We're as good as dead anyway, if we don't make a move, what do we have to lose?" Horthy asked.

"I believe in her," Lirka said.

*Someone does,* Esera sighed to herself. "Does anyone else have a better plan?" she asked them. No one stepped up to the challenge. "Exactly. We're either doing this my way, or we die. What's it going to be?"

"Fine," Wendil relented. "If the Commerce Guild gets their way, I get sent home for high treason. I've spent too long in prison as it is. Better to die now than die in a life sentence."

There was silence among the five now. Esera realized they were all looking at her. Four Separatist politicians, looking to a Jedi knight for leadership, in a plan to rescue General Grievous, who was being held captive by his own supposed allies. *Where did my life go so wrong?* Esera asked herself, before taking a deep breath.

"Alright, this is it. Last chance to turn back," she said.

"Let's do this," Horthy growled, wringing his hands on the barrel of his slugthrower.

"If we live, this will be one hell of a story," Cathida said.

"Good luck, everyone!" cheered Lirka. Her bright smile in the face of imminent death didn't sit right with Esera. But could she really judge the woman? Lirka had never even held a gun until today, she didn't know what she was getting into.

"May the Force be with us..." muttered Esera.

And so began the most unexpected thing Esera had ever had to do.

The Holonet had been on fire all afternoon. Grievous's ascension to leadership of the Separatists was relatively unsurprising, at least compared to Dooku's death. Bail Organa and everyone else in the Senate had expected Grievous to be put in command, for lack of any other clear leader. No, what was surprising was how suddenly the feeds from Raxus had gone dark before switching to some kind of emergency broadcast signal. The pundits had spent a good hour speculating on what could have happened before Shu Mai's address was sent to the whole galaxy. For a foolish few moments, Bail had allowed himself to hope this war was going to end. Then came the second galaxy-wide address through the Holonet, not three hours after the first.

"I am Vice Admiral Hithlu, acting commander of the First Fleet of the Confederate Navy," said a grim Umbaran, his white hair swept back and his face so gaunt one could almost see the skull behind the skin. He stood behind a podium emblazonment with the Confederacy's hexagon, and Separatist banners hung behind him. "Hours ago, a coup was launched against the lawful government of our nation. This coup is being carried out by the private security forces of the Commerce Guild, acting only in the interests of the Commerce Guild. It is clear they have lost faith in our cause, and now seek to return to their corrupt masters in the Republic. And what better way for them to do this than to decapitate our movement and deliver it to Coruscant? Nay! Shu Mai and her ilk do not speak for the popular will of the nation! She speaks for herself, and the spineless cowards who no longer have the will to see our struggle through to the promised final victory. Any orders of surrender or ceasefire from Raxus are to be ignored-"

The Umbaran's speech went on along these lines for some time, and with each minute, Bail's heart sunk. Not only would the galaxy continue to be locked in civil war, but now there would be a civil war within a civil war if this Hithlu got his way. *There goes our peace,* he thought.

"There's a silver lining to all this," Mon Mothma sighed. "If the Separatists start fighting each other, it'll shorten the war by just that much."

"I can only hope Grievous stays in custody. This is the best chance we've ever had to bring him to justice," Padme Amidala said. There was a dark look on her face. Bail couldn't blame her for the animosity she felt towards that horrible cyborg

It didn't take long for the media to begin a new round of speculation on what this meant for the course of history. HNN and other pro-Republic outlets concluded that it would drastically shorten the war in the Republic's favor. Some more neutral organizations thought it might actually strengthen the Separatist movement in the long run, provided their leadership survived the coming days. Bail had the feeling that they might be right. Nothing brought people together better than being the victims of a treasonous elite.

**Author's note:** The alternate title was "In which a band of politicians and a seriously misplaced Jedi decide they're all bad enough dudes to rescue the president." Or head of state, in this case. Is this the power of patriotism?

Anyways, sorry about the long delay in posting. Work was pretty damn awful these last few weeks, I wasn't able to get anything done. I hope to have the next chapter up soon enough, but who knows. My schedule for posting has gone to the dogs, so to speak.

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